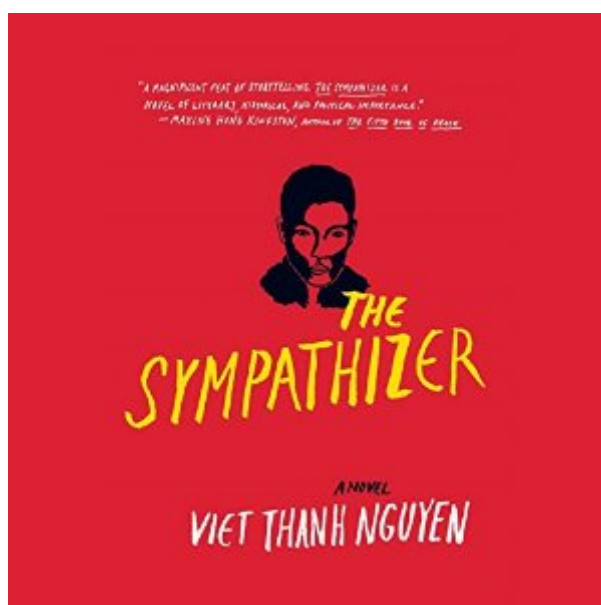


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# The Sympathizer: A Novel



## Synopsis

Pulitzer Prize, Fiction, 2016 A profound, startling, and beautifully crafted debut novel, *The Sympathizer* is the story of a man of two minds, someone whose political beliefs clash with his individual loyalties. It is April 1975, and Saigon is in chaos. At his villa, a general of the South Vietnamese army is drinking whiskey and, with the help of his trusted captain, drawing up a list of those who will be given passage aboard the last flights out of the country. The general and his compatriots start a new life in Los Angeles, unaware that one among their number, the captain, is secretly observing and reporting on the group to a higher-up in the Viet Cong. *The Sympathizer* is the story of this captain: a man brought up by an absent French father and a poor Vietnamese mother, a man who went to university in America, but returned to Vietnam to fight for the Communist cause. A gripping spy novel, an astute exploration of extreme politics, and a moving love story, *The Sympathizer* explores a life between two worlds and examines the legacy of the Vietnam War in literature, film, and the wars we fight today.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"*The Sympathizer*" was published exactly 40 years after the fall of Saigon to Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces and the effective end of the 10-year old conflict. The impact of that war is still felt, to some degree, in the U.S. On the other hand, when Americans visit Vietnam (northern or southern regions), they only rarely hear any mention of the war and they see a country dramatically transformed physically, in many ways. While the form of national government there is still officially

communist, there is abundant proof that the economy is solidly capitalist. As long as 15 years ago, I asked a ranking member of an official delegation visiting Washington about this and his comment was that while the North had won the "civil war", the South had won the soul of the whole country--meaning that the Vietnamese have always been independent-minded, small land holders and capitalists at heart throughout a history of at least 2000 years. I mention all of the above to point out the irony that is inherent in this novel. "The Sympathizer" is blind to the present as it chronicles the stories of several members of the South Vietnamese forces at the very end of the war (1975) into the early 1980s. The central character among them is the right hand man of a powerful general--the acting head of the national police in the waning days of the Saigon government--whose personal history puts him at odds with all daily reality. He was born a Northerner--therefore existentially suspect by all Southerners; he is half-French--therefore someone to be disdained by the instinctively atavistic and/or racist Vietnamese; he is a mole for the Viet Cong in the midst of the Saigon power structure; he is U.S.

"The Sympathizer" is a brilliant novel, but it fell flat for me. Its hero -- or anti-hero -- isn't quite convincing in his role(s). The novel is presented as the memoir of a young officer in the South Vietnamese army and secret police during the fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese Communist army. He is a traitor, a secret Communist operative, who routinely sends all of the confidential information he receives to his boyhood buddy, a Communist intelligence officer also hidden within the South Vietnamese army. In addition to his emotional confusion -- posing as an anti-communist while actually helping the Communists -- the anti-hero is also biracial -- his father was a French Roman Catholic priest who seduced his teenage Vietnamese mother. He has grown up being insulted by many Vietnamese as a "bastard." Allegedly, his dual ethnic identity makes him a better spy -- treated with suspicion by all, he is the last to be suspected of any crimes -- it's just assumed that a 'bastard' will be grateful for his employment and loyal. His friendly, non-judgmental manner and willingness to listen have made him the "sympathizer." The book is well-written, with vivid evocations of the weather, culture, people and atmosphere of wartime Saigon, and the Vietnamese refugee groups in America and Asia after the war. This is the material of a gripping psychological thriller, but the author chose to write the book as a black comedy. The problem with the book is that even with the greater latitude given by the black comedy genre, the protagonist does not come across as a real Communist operative or as a 1970's Vietnamese.

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